

UK lecturers dispute: Lessons from the West Virginia teachers strike

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (UK)

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The strike by lecturers, librarians and administration staff against the attack on pensions by Universities UK (UUK) is entering its third week. Drawing lessons from the ongoing strike by 30,000 teachers in the US state of West Virginia is crucial in politically arming education staff here in the UK.

The West Virginia teachers are fighting over issues familiar to workers the world over: cuts in wages, deteriorating social infrastructure, attacks on public education, growing social inequality and rising health care costs.

The unions involved—the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association—have not sought to spread the strike and to mobilise other workers behind it. Instead, from the outset they have sought to suppress, limit and redirect the opposition of teachers behind support for the Democratic Party and bankrupt appeals to state legislators.

The role of the unions as an industrial police force for the bosses was made clear last week when, behind the backs of the teachers, they negotiated a sell-out deal with West Virginia's Republican billionaire state governor, Jim Justice.

The proposed deal did not meet any of the teachers' demands but was held up as the basis for calling off the strike.

But the teachers refused to accept the sell-out and voted to stay out. They held impromptu meetings in the state capitol rejecting the call to end the strike, followed by votes in every school district in the state ending with the same result.

The strikes by the West Virginia teachers and university workers in Britain are an expression of a resurgent movement by workers globally in defence of their jobs, wages, pensions and livelihoods. Since the

beginning of the year, there have been strikes of metalworkers in Germany and Turkey and airline workers in France. Mass protests have erupted in Iran, Tunisia, Morocco, Greece and other countries. In the Czech Republic, Skoda autoworkers are threatening to strike. Here in Britain, strikes have been held by bus workers, railway workers and other sections of the working class.

In every instance, workers are being brought face to face with common issues of a fundamental character.

- Workers confront governments, of all political stripes, intent on imposing savage austerity measures and doing away with historically won social gains—including decent health and education provision and the right to pensions and a secure retirement.

- Workers confront so-called opposition political parties that offer no genuine alternative. For the Republicans, who control the White House and Congress, and the Democrats, who are the minority—in Britain substitute the Conservatives, who are in power, and Labour, which is in opposition.

- Every single struggle of workers to defend their livelihoods brings them into direct conflict with the pro-capitalist, nationalist, trade union apparatus. All experience internationally testifies to the fact that the unions are intent only on suppressing social opposition to the ruling elite and betraying struggles in their role as allies of government and management.

The unions cannot be considered as organisations that defend workers' interests.

Just one day before the West Virginia teachers voted down the unions' call to return to work, a lawyer for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees set out—before the US Supreme Court—the axis on which the unions operate. The

lawyer, David Frederick, declared that “union security is the trade-off for no strikes.” He declared that without financial mechanisms to guarantee the stability of the unions, there would be “an untold spectre of labour unrest throughout the country.”

Some workers may have confidence in the University and College Union (UCU) due to its current rhetoric about fighting the pension cuts, but the *record* of the UCU belies this demagoguery.

The UCU has demonstrated repeatedly that it will not wage a serious fight. The Tory government of David Cameron was able to impose the first attacks on pensions in 2012 with the unions throughout the public sector putting up hardly any resistance, despite the determination of millions of workers to fight. By 2015, the employers were emboldened to close the final-salary pension scheme and transferred lecturers onto the career average scheme. The UCU organised no resistance with only a token two-day strike over pay, pensions and conditions held in 2016.

Due to its refusal to fight, the UCU has lost 16,000 members—with numbers declining from 120,000 in 2007 to 104,000 by 2016. The UCU has already signalled that it is preparing another sell-out with its offer of further concessions to UUK last week.

This is a universal process, with the unions in the public and private sector barely lifting a finger to oppose the destruction of jobs, wages and pensions carried out by successive government since 2008. Only two years ago, 50,000 junior doctors fought in a bitter yearlong dispute against the imposition of a vastly inferior contract. No other health union mobilised a single worker in the doctors’ defence and the strike was sold out—with the contract imposed—by the British Medical Association (BMA). Many doctors left the BMA in disgust.

Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn issued platitudes in defence of the doctors, while insisting that the only way forward was for talks between the BMA and an employer’s body backed tooth and nail by the Tory government.

In the US, massive pressure is now being brought to bear upon the teachers, with threats of fines and injunctions against them. Lecturers in the UK face similar threats. At the University of Kent, strikers have been warned that failure to reschedule lectures or classes lost due to industrial action would see them lose

50 to 100 percent of their pay for each day lost. At least three other universities have made similar threats.

The attacks being imposed on pensions are government backed and are integral to the marketization of the education sector. Labour is as desperate as the Tories to get the strike off the agenda, with the only statement made by Corbyn urging once again that the UCU and UUK reach an agreement.

In their revolt against the unions, the West Virginia teachers point the way forward. Left in the hands of the union bureaucracy, the UK lecturers strike will go down in defeat, with disastrous consequences for this and future generations of workers. To win, the formation of new fighting organisations that are independent of the unions are required.

Rank-and-file committees must be elected at every university, democratically controlled, and the strike directed by the workers themselves.

The struggle must be broadened out to encompass lecturers and university staff in the many other universities—who have not been called out by the UCU—and further education workers in colleges who are demanding better pay.

To prevent the isolation of the strike, workers throughout the education sector must be mobilised, as well as millions of workers throughout the public and private sector who face similar attacks.

This is the programme fought for by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge workers to join the SEP as the only party representing the interests of the working class.



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